

The Declaration of Independence

Setting the Stage On July 4, 1776, the Second Continental Congress adopted what became one of America's most cherished documents. Written by Thomas Jefferson, the Declaration of Independence voiced the reasons for separating from Britain and provided the principles of government upon which the United States would be built. **See Primary Source Explorer**

[Preamble]

When in the Course of human events, it becomes necessary for one people to dissolve the political bands which have connected them with another, and to assume among the powers of the earth, the separate and equal station to which the Laws of Nature and of Nature's God entitle them, a decent respect to the opinions of mankind requires that they should declare the causes which impel them to the separation.

[The Right of the People to Control Their Government]

We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are **endowed**¹ by their Creator with certain **unalienable**² Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness; that, to secure these rights, Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed; that whenever any Form of Government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the Right of the People to alter or to abolish it, and to institute new Government, laying its foundation on such principles and organizing its powers in such form, as to them shall seem most likely to effect their Safety and Happiness. Prudence, indeed, will dictate that Governments long established should not be changed for light and transient causes; and accordingly all experience hath shewn that mankind are more disposed to suffer, while evils are sufferable, than to right themselves by abolishing the forms to which they are accustomed. But when a long train of abuses and **usurpations**,³ pursuing invariably the same Object, evinces a design to reduce them under absolute **Despotism**,⁴ it is their right, it is their duty, to throw off such Government, and to provide new Guards for their future security.

Such has been the patient sufferance of these Colonies; and such is now the necessity which constrains them to alter their former Systems of Government. The history of the present King of Great Britain is a history of repeated injuries and usurpations, all having in direct object the establishment of an absolute Tyranny over these States. To prove this, let facts be submitted to a **candid**⁵ world.

A CLOSER LOOK

RIGHTS OF THE PEOPLE

The ideas in this passage reflect the views of John Locke. Locke was an English philosopher who believed that the natural rights of individuals came from God, but that a government's power comes from the consent of the governed. This belief is the foundation of modern democracy.

1. In what way can American voters bring about changes in their government?

1. **endowed**: provided.

2. **unalienable**: unable to be taken away.

3. **usurpations**: unjust seizures of power.

4. **Despotism**: rule by a tyrant with absolute power.

5. **candid**: fair, impartial.

[Tyrannical Acts of the British King]

He has refused his Assent to Laws, the most wholesome and necessary for the public good.

He has forbidden his Governors to pass Laws of immediate and pressing importance, unless suspended in their operation till his assent should be obtained; and, when so suspended, he has utterly neglected to attend to them.

He has refused to pass other Laws for the accommodation of large districts of people, unless those people would **relinquish**⁶ the right of Representation in the Legislature, a right inestimable to them, and formidable to tyrants only.

He has called together legislative bodies at places unusual, uncomfortable, and distant from the depository of their public Records, for the sole purpose of fatiguing them into compliance with his measures.

He has dissolved Representative Houses repeatedly, for opposing with manly firmness his invasions on the rights of the people.

He has refused for a long time, after such dissolutions, to cause others to be elected; whereby the Legislative powers, incapable of Annihilation, have returned to the people at large for their exercise; the State remaining in the mean time exposed to all the dangers of invasions from without, and **convulsions**⁷ within.

He has endeavoured to prevent the population of these States; for that purpose obstructing the Laws for **Naturalization**⁸ of Foreigners; refusing to pass others to encourage their migration hither, and raising the conditions of new Appropriations of Lands.

He has obstructed the Administration of Justice, by refusing his Assent to Laws for establishing Judiciary powers.

He has made Judges dependent on his Will alone, for the **tenure**⁹ of their offices, and the amount and payment of their salaries.

He has erected a multitude of New Offices, and sent hither swarms of Officers to harass our people and **eat out their substance**.¹⁰

He has kept among us, in times of peace, Standing Armies, without the Consent of our legislatures.

He has affected to render the Military independent of and superior to the Civil power. He has combined with others to subject us to a jurisdiction foreign to our constitution and unacknowledged by our laws; giving his Assent to their Acts of pretended Legislation:

For **quartering**¹¹ large bodies of armed troops among us;

For protecting them, by a mock Trial, from punishment for any Murders which they should commit on the Inhabitants of these States;

For cutting off our Trade with all parts of the world;

6. **relinquish**: give up.

7. **convulsions**: violent disturbances.

8. **Naturalization**: process of becoming a citizen.

9. **tenure**: term.

10. **eat out their substance**: drain their resources.

11. **quartering**: housing or giving lodging to.

A CLOSER LOOK

GRIEVANCES AGAINST BRITAIN

The list contains 27 offenses by the British king and others against the colonies. It helps explain why it became necessary to seek independence.

2. Which offense do you think was the worst? Why?

A CLOSER LOOK

LOSS OF REPRESENTATIVE GOVERNMENT

One of the Intolerable Acts of 1774 stripped the Massachusetts Legislature of many powers and gave them to the colony's British governor.

3. Why was this action so "intolerable"?

QUARTERING TROOPS WITHOUT CONSENT

The Quartering Act of 1765 required colonists to provide housing and supplies for British troops in America.

4. Why did colonists object to this act?

A CLOSER LOOK

TAXATION WITHOUT REPRESENTATION

The colonists believed in the long-standing British tradition that Parliament could tax only those citizens it represented—and the colonists claimed to have no representation in Parliament.

5. How do persons today give consent to taxation?

A CLOSER LOOK

PETITIONING THE KING

The colonists sent many petitions to King George III. In the Olive Branch Petition of 1775, the colonists expressed their desire to achieve "a happy and permanent reconciliation." The king rejected the petition.

6. Why did the colonists at first attempt to solve the dispute and remain loyal?

For imposing Taxes on us without our Consent;
For depriving us, in many cases, of the benefits of Trial by Jury;
For transporting us beyond Seas to be tried for pretended offenses;
For abolishing the free System of English Laws in a neighboring Province, establishing therein an Arbitrary¹² government, and enlarging its Boundaries so as to render it at once an example and fit instrument for introducing the same absolute rule into these Colonies;

For taking away our Charters, abolishing our most valuable laws, and altering fundamentally the Forms of our Governments;

For suspending our own Legislatures, and declaring themselves invested with power to legislate for us in all cases whatsoever.

He has abdicated¹³ Government here, by declaring us out of his Protection and waging War against us.

He has plundered our seas, ravaged our Coasts, burnt our towns, and destroyed the lives of our people.

He is at this time transporting large Armies of foreign Mercenaries¹⁴ to compleat the works of death, desolation, and tyranny, already begun with circumstances of Cruelty & perfidy¹⁵ scarcely paralleled in the most barbarous ages, and totally unworthy the Head of a civilized nation.

He has constrained our fellow Citizens, taken Captive on the high Seas, to bear Arms against their Country, to become the executioners of their friends and Brethren, or to fall themselves by their Hands.

He has excited domestic insurrections¹⁶ amongst us, and has endeavoured to bring on the inhabitants of our frontiers the merciless Indian Savages, whose known rule of warfare is an undistinguished destruction of all ages, sexes and conditions.

[Efforts of the Colonies to Avoid Separation]

In every stage of these Oppressions We have Petitioned for Redress¹⁷ in the most humble terms; Our repeated Petitions have been answered only by repeated injury. A Prince, whose character is thus marked by every act which may define a Tyrant, is unfit to be the ruler of a free people.

Nor have We been wanting in attentions to our British brethren. We have warned them from time to time of attempts by their legislature to extend an unwarrantable jurisdiction over us. We have reminded them of the circumstances of our emigration and settlement here. We have appealed to their native justice and magnanimity¹⁸, and we have conjured them by the ties of our common kindred, to disavow these usurpations, which would inevitably interrupt our connections and correspondence. They too have been deaf to

12. **Arbitrary**: not limited by law.

13. **abdicated**: given up.

14. **foreign Mercenaries**: professional soldiers hired to serve in a foreign army.

15. **perfidy**: dishonesty, disloyalty.

16. **domestic insurrections**: rebellions at home.

17. **Petitioned for Redress**: asked for the correction of wrongs.

18. **magnanimity**: generosity, forgiveness.

the voice of justice and of **consanguinity**.¹⁹ We must, therefore, **acquiesce**²⁰ in the necessity, which denounces our Separation, and hold them, as we hold the rest of mankind, Enemies in War, in Peace Friends.

[The Colonies Are Declared Free and Independent]

We, therefore, the Representatives of the United States of America, in General Congress, Assembled, appealing to the Supreme Judge of the world for the **rectitude**²¹ of our intentions, do, in the name, and by the Authority of the good People of these Colonies solemnly publish and declare, That these United Colonies are, and of Right ought to be, Free and Independent States; that they are Absolved from all Allegiance to the British Crown, and that all political connection between them and the State of Great Britain is, and ought to be, totally dissolved; and that as Free and Independent States, they have full Power to levy War, conclude Peace, contract Alliances, establish Commerce, and do all other Acts and Things which Independent States may of right do.

And for the support of this Declaration, with a firm reliance on the protection of divine Providence, we mutually pledge to each other our Lives, our Fortunes, and our sacred Honor. [Signed by]

John Hancock *President, from Massachusetts*
[Georgia] Button Gwinnett; Lyman Hall;
George Walton

[Rhode Island] Stephen Hopkins;
William Ellery

[Connecticut] Roger Sherman;
Samuel Huntington; William Williams;
Oliver Wolcott

[North Carolina] William Hooper;
Joseph Hewes; John Penn

[South Carolina] Edward Rutledge;
Thomas Heyward, Jr.; Thomas Lynch, Jr.;
Arthur Middleton

[Maryland] Samuel Chase; William Paca;
Thomas Stone; Charles Carroll

[Virginia] George Wythe;
Richard Henry Lee; Thomas Jefferson;

Benjamin Harrison; Thomas Nelson, Jr.;
Francis Lightfoot Lee; Carter Braxton

[Pennsylvania] Robert Morris;
Benjamin Rush; Benjamin Franklin;
John Morton; George Clymer; James Smith;
George Taylor; James Wilson; George Ross

[Delaware] Caesar Rodney; George Read;
Thomas McKean

[New York] William Floyd; Philip Livingston;
Francis Lewis; Lewis Morris

[New Jersey] Richard Stockton; John
Witherspoon; Francis Hopkinson; John
Hart; Abraham Clark

[New Hampshire] Josiah Bartlett; William
Whipple; Matthew Thornton

[Massachusetts] Samuel Adams; John
Adams; Robert Treat Paine; Elbridge Gerry

A CLOSER LOOK

POWERS OF AN INDEPENDENT GOVERNMENT

The colonists identified the ability to wage war and agree to peace; to make alliances with other nations; and to set up an economic system as powers of a free and independent government.

7. What other powers are held by an independent government?

A CLOSER LOOK

DECLARATION SIGNERS

The Declaration was signed by 56 representatives from the 13 original states.

8. Which signers do you recognize? Write one line about each of those signers.

19. consanguinity: relationship by a common ancestor; close connection.

20. acquiesce: accept without protest.

21. rectitude: moral uprightness.

Interactive Primary Source Assessment

1. Main Ideas

- What is the purpose of the Declaration of Independence as stated in the Preamble?
- What are the five main parts of the Declaration?
- What are three rights that all people have?

2. Critical Thinking

Drawing Conclusions Why did the colonies feel that they had to declare their independence?

THINK ABOUT

- colonial grievances against Britain
- Britain's response to these grievances